

On Tuesday, October 23, 2007, the Committee held an oversight hearing to examine the adverse health and environmental impact on the Navajo people of decades of uranium mining and milling conducted in and around the Navajo reservation in order to meet the federal government's need for nuclear weapons material. Witnesses at the hearing included representatives of the Navajo Nation government, Navajo citizens who personally affected by the contamination, and representatives of the federal agencies responsible for addressing aspects of the contamination. At the hearing, the Committee received testimony about the extent to which the surface and groundwater contamination from the uranium mines and mills has been cleaned up, the clean-up that remains to be done, and the steps federal agencies must take in cooperation with the Navajo Nation in order to address the remaining health and environmental problems.

**There is widespread surface and groundwater contamination.** After decades of uranium mining, at least 520 radioactive mines in the Navajo Nation were abandoned without being cleaned up. Five uranium mill sites, where uranium ore was processed, were also left behind. Two witnesses who live near the abandoned Northeast Church Rock Mine described giant mounds of radioactive ore waste that remain uncovered in the immediate vicinity of Navajo homes. The radium levels at the mine were 270 times the U.S. EPA standard. Another witness described uranium-contaminated drinking water from a well being mixed with less contaminated water before being provided to the Navajo.

**Federal agencies have taken only limited clean-up steps.** U.S. EPA has conducted an environmental site assessment at just one of the 520 abandoned mines. Clean-up work at that site has been limited to the removal of a relatively small amount of contaminated dirt. The Department of Energy has initiated groundwater remediation efforts at three mill sites, but the process is expected to take between 20 and 60 years to complete. Only two radioactive homes and one radioactive floor have been removed.

**Much work remains to be done.** At the conclusion of the testimony, Chairman Waxman explained that several steps must be taken simultaneously. The federal government needs to conduct a comprehensive health assessment of the risks posed to the health of the Navajo people by the contamination from uranium mining and milling. U.S. EPA should conduct detailed site assessments at the priority mines sites and at least basic assessments at every abandoned mine site. Rigorous sampling of groundwater at these sites is essential. Where the agencies have the data needed to conduct clean-ups, work has to be initiated or accelerated.

The Committee will monitor the progress of the clean-up. Federal agency witnesses met with the Committee in December 2007 to present their action plans for addressing the contamination problems and requests for any resources or authorizations they need from Congress to implement those action plans.